People

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The Museum of Modern Art's exhibition history—from our founding in 1929 to the present—is available online. It includes exhibition catalogues, primary documents, installation views, and an index of participating artists.

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modern starts comprises three exhibitions principally devoted to the visual arts in the period 1880–1920 and drawn from the collection of The Museum of Modern Art. This is the period in which the modern—that is to say, modern art—starts, insofar as the Museum's collection is mainly concerned. And it is a period of many modern starts, many different beginnings or initiatives, the most influential of which are represented in these exhibitions.

PEOPLE is devoted to the representation of the human figure; **PLACES** to particular parts of space, represented or real; and **THINGS** to objects, again both represented and real. All three exhibitions include selected works of art made after 1920, including contemporary works, in order to demonstrate the persistence of ideas and themes broached in the period of Modern *Starts*.

PEOPLE has eight parts, as described in this brochure, which is an invitation to see selected works of art in these installations indicated by the icon on the wall labels.

The cover illustration shows Aristide Maillol's sculpture *The River* (begun 1938–39, completed 1943), which is exhibited at the entrance to **PEOPLE**. Its association of a woman and the natural world—and placement of a woman in the recumbent position associable with the horizontality of the landscape—was a traditional metaphor and compositional arrangement that persisted beyond the 1880–1920 period. It is shown adjacent to Barnett Newman's painting *Vir Heroicus Sublimis* of 1950–51. When Newman said that he meant his title to evoke how man can be heroic and sublime, he unquestionably meant mankind, but the association of masculinity and the verticality of the painting's compositional element was noted by critics when it was first exhibited; that, too, was a traditional metaphor that persisted beyond the period of Modern *Starts*.



Henri Matisse. The Moroccans. 1915–16. Oil on canvas, 71½" x 9'2" (181.3 x 279.4 cm). The Museum of Modern Art, New York. Gift of Mr. and Mrs. Samuel A. Marx

People is about the representation of the human figure in modern art, mainly in the period 1880–1920. Before this period, figural art was often thought of as silent storytelling through the representation of human gestures and actions—a sort of frozen theater. Although this approach persisted, it was often replaced by compositions of figures and figural fragments whose gestures and actions do not seem to tell comprehensible stories, if they can be deciphered at all. There will never be a consensus on what is happening in some of these works. Indeed, one of their aims is to create uncertainty: to puzzle us, slow us down in our looking, and keep us visually engaged.

Black areas of a painting often indicate hard-to-see-into shadows. In Henri Matisse's *The Moroccans*, it is not certain whether we are expected to read the black as shadow, but looking at this picture is a bit like puzzling out objects wrapped in shadow in the world. We are shown three main zones, separated by black, and are asked to decipher them and how they might be associated. In the right zone, a seated Moroccan is identifiable by a simplified turban. At lower left are melons with green leaves. The background zone comprises architectural elements, including the dome of a mosque and a parapet with a vase of striped flowers. This is a very disjunctive story about a



Hilaire-Germain-Edgar Degas. At the Milliner's. c. 1882. Pastel on paper, 27% x 27%" (70.2 x 70.5 cm). The Museum of Modern Art, New York. Gift of Mrs. David M. Levy

Moroccan scene that is only put together by jumping visually from one part of the painting to the next. Instead of making a picture of a story and then asking us to imagine it coming to life, Matisse asks us to participate in the creation of the story by making the story come to life in the time of our viewing.

Of course, figural representations have been made not with the aim of telling a story, but of recording an appearance. Portraiture is, therefore, a part of the subject of *People*. But it does not appear as a separate exhibition because portraiture takes unusual forms in the period 1880–1920. For example, most people who look at Edgar Degas's *At the Milliner's* seem at first to see a single figure trying on a hat. (This is, in fact, a portrait of the American painter Mary Cassatt.) Longer looking will deliver the image of a second figure and allow us to disentangle a story about a customer and a shop assistant. Yet the ribbonlike shapes that loop around the composition seem to circulate quickly and endlessly, as if Degas wanted to prevent us from stopping to look for long at any single area. Like Matisse, Degas delays the delivery of the meaning, only he does so by increasing the velocity of the compositional circulation.

COMPOSING WITH THE FIGURE

In the period 1880–1920 the role of the figure in pictorial art changed in important ways, as the more experimental artists began to think less about representing the figure than about composing with the figure. That is, there was a big shift from interest in the depiction of gestures and postures to interest in figural shapes as elements of pictorial compositions. Interest in the language of the body gave way to interest in the language of figural composition.

Thus, new attention was paid to the relationship of the figure and the surface or ground of a work, using that relationship as a way of conveying meaning. For example, in Édouard Vuillard's painting of his mother and sister, his sister, pressed up against the wall at the left, is not easily separable from the pattern of the wallpaper—an effect that accentuates the self-effacement of her pose as she bends her head shyly in greeting, just getting it into the space of the painting. In contrast, Mme Vuillard is a bold, confident presence, and is contrasted against the patterned interior. Camouflaging the one figure within the variegated background, and therefore making it harder to see, also serves to make the figure more of a compositional element, a device that helps unify the composition. Making the other figure a flat pattern contrasted against the background makes it seem as much an abstracted shape

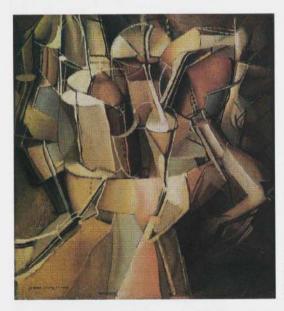


Édouard Vuillard. Mother and Sister of the Artist. c. 1893. Oil on canvas, 18½ x 22½" (46.4 x 56.5 cm). The Museum of Modern Art, New York. Gift of Mrs. Saidie A. May

as a human figure; this device, too, was one used for compositional reasons, as painters began to think of their paintings as compositions of flat shapes.

The use of pictorial elements abstracted from gestures and postures, and not gestures and postures themselves, led to the deconstruction of the figure in works of this period. Thus, Marcel Duchamp's painting *The Passage from Virgin to Bride* comprises a compilation of abstracted volumes and outlined convex and concave shapes that allude to, without exactly describing, parts of the body. Its title suggests that he intended to show not so much a figure as a figural transformation, and the work may be interpreted as an evocation of a figure in movement as well as a view into its skeletal structure.

Both the Vuillard and the Duchamp, in their different ways, require us to decipher visual narratives that are not immediately apparent. Neither work is decipherable without reading its title. And there is unlikely to be agreement about what either work means, even with the help of its title. This is one of the results of composing with the figure. It is enough to make us wonder whether the actual aim of such works includes asking us to decide for ourselves what they might mean.

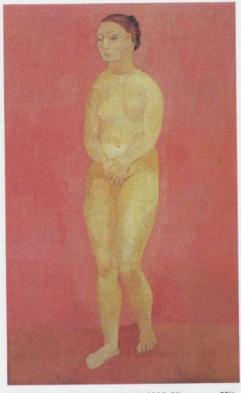


Marcel Duchamp. The Passage from Virgin to Bride. 1912. Oil on canvas, 23% x 21½" (59.4 x 54 cm). The Museum of Modern Art, New York. Purchase

COMPOSING THE FIGURE

Of works of art with one clearly defined figure (or few such figures), it may be said that the composition of the figure is effectively the composition of the work. Composing the figure itself is the artist's principal task. This will mainly involve shaping the figure's posture and silhouette. It may also involve composing the "negative" spaces within the figural shape. In the case of paintings and drawings, it will additionally involve calibrating the space between the silhouette of the figure and the external silhouette of the work itself. And decisions about placement will affect decisions about posture.

Pablo Picasso's painting, a portrait of his then lover,



Pablo Picasso. Nude with Joined Hands. 1906. Oil on canvas, 60% x 37% (153.7 x 94.3 cm). The Museum of Modern Art, New York. The William S. Paley Collection

Fernande Olivier, forms an enclosed shape within the continuous pink ground. The woman's ambiguous gesture, possibly denoting modesty, adds to the sense of apartness she conveys. Like the other paintings in this exhibition, this work belongs to a long tradition of representations intended to evoke an Arcadia of an unspecified time or place. This tradition allowed early modern artists two useful freedoms. First, bare settings made possible the strong graphic clarity of their compositions. Second, the clarity of the design disguises, for a moment, the obscurity of what actually is being represented, which seems appropriate to representations of a lost Arcadian world.

POSED TO UNPOSED: ENCOUNTERS WITH THE CAMERA



Elliott Erwitt. Paris. 1952. Gelatin silver print, 19% x 121% 6" (49.2 x 30.6 cm). The Museum of Modern Art, New York. Gift of the photographer

Posing for the camera is a habit that is as old as the medium of photography itself. The daguerreotype process, widely in use by the 1840s, required that sitters remain absolutely still for prolonged exposures, often with their heads in metal brackets to prevent movement. Yet even as the technology changed to accommodate greater freedom in the picture-taking process, posing continued to serve an important function, allowing both subject and photographer a means of controlling the look and arrangement of an image. This installation considers

the many varieties of posing, including the impetus to "strike a pose" through the adoption of theatrical gestures and mugging for the camera.

Elliott Erwitt's photograph of an unidentified group standing on an overburdened park bench is one account of posing in everyday situations. The group beams at the camera from its elevated position while a lone dissenter sits squarely on the bench ignoring the antics of her comrades. Erwitt's picture, in which people knowingly prepare themselves to be photographed, stands in opposition to another park bench vignette, Garry Winogrand's World's Fair, New York City. Unlike Erwitt's photograph, this picture provides no evidence whatsoever that the sitters are aware of the photographer. Instead their focus is concentrated elsewhere—on intimate conversations and the passing activity of park life. As such the image

captures the basic qualities of unposed photographs.

"Unposed" immediately brings to mind photographs that are spontaneous, unplanned, and intuitive. Beginning in the 1890s, with the widespread availability of small handheld cameras, pictures could be taken easily and unobtrusively. Whereas the cumbersome camera equipment of preceding decades had precluded the possibility of photographing surreptitiously, the handheld camera enabled photographers to capture human activity as if from the standpoint of an invisible observer. It was no longer necessary to plan or pose pictures, or even to have any direct contact with the subjects. The result was a new kind of picture, shaped by the photographer's acute and immediate response to visual stimuli.

Underlying the distinction between posed and unposed is the premise that each represents a very different relationship between subject and visual recorder. In posed photographs, both parties must acknowledge or participate in the photographic act, whereas unposed pictures may be made without the subject's knowledge. Yet in some instances the photographer has deliberately complicated this distinction by creating posed pictures that possess the casualness of a snapshot, or recording a "natural occurrence" that looks remarkably staged. In such instances it is nearly impossible to determine from visual clues the extent to which the photographer has directed a scene or simply documented it. Thus *Posed to Unposed* leaves room for ambiguity, inviting the viewer's thought and speculation.



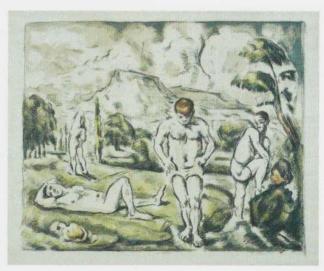
Garry Winogrand.
World's Fair, New
York City. 1964.
Gelatin silver print,
8% x 12½" (21.9 x
32.7 cm). The
Museum of Modern
Art, New York. Gift
of N. Carol Lipis

ACTORS, DANCERS, BATHERS

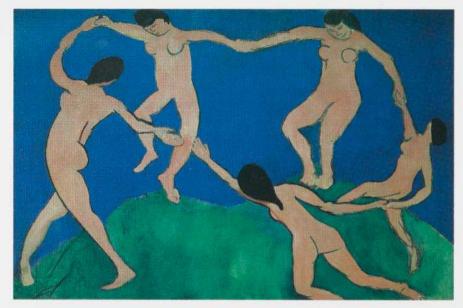
Artists have taken a special interest in representing figures for whom posing or performing is integral to what they do. Obviously, actors and dancers fall into this category. So do artists' models, and those figures that nude models can easily be made to resemble, like bathers. But with images of such figures, it is not always easy to tell who is doing the composing, the figure or the artist.

The poet W. B. Yeats famously asked, "Can we tell the dancer from the dance?" The same question may be asked in front of Henri Matisse's *Dance*, but also an additional question: How can we tell the composition of *Dance* from the composition of the dancers represented in it? We cannot, for each dancer is shaped by the dance. And, together, they are both shaped by the dance and shape the composition of the painting. But, additionally, the composition of the painting shapes them.

Matisse intended this painting to be approached from the right-hand side. (It was made as a full-size study for a work, now in the Hermitage Museum in St. Petersburg, that originally hung above a staircase in a Moscow palace, where it was approached from the lower right as you climbed.) The shaping of the figures is designed to form a looping movement from lower right to upper left, and then along the top and right edges of the canvas.



Paul Cézanne. The Bathers, Large Plate. 1896–97. Lithograph, comp.: 16¾ x 201¾ s° (42.6 x 52.5 cm). Publisher: Ambroise Vollard, Paris. Printer: Auguste Clot, Paris. The Museum of Modern Art, New York. Lillie P. Bliss Collection



Henri Matisse. Dance (First Version). 1909. Oil on canvas, 8'6½" x 12'9½" (259.7 x 390.1 cm). The Museum of Modern Art, New York. Gift of Nelson A. Rockefeller in honor of Alfred H. Barr, Jr.

Matisse originally placed two dancers at the left side before the single large dancer was placed there to speed up the movement. (Signs of an earlier, erased figure may be seen between this dancer's legs.)

In the case of the lithograph by Paul Cézanne, we also see figures whose poses easily allow us to name them, in this case as bathers. (Actually, the standing bather in this work may be derived from a photograph of a studio model, also shown in this gallery, a photograph which almost certainly influenced Cézanne's more famous *Bather* in the preceding gallery.) As with Matisse's dancers, Cézanne's bathers shape the composition of the work and its composition shapes them. Some bathers rhyme visually with some landscape elements: for example, the standing figure to the left rhymes with the surrounding trees. And some landscape elements can look a bit like parts of figures, including the shape at bottom right—in which case, what the figure beside this shape is actually doing seems puzzling. Then, what the background figure is doing seems even more puzzling. These figures are more than simply bathers, but what more is uncertain. What does seem certain is that the artist has formed the geography of the landscape to include them.

This installation explores the ways in which early modern artists have represented human gesture, posture, and facial expression in order to convey particular moods or emotions. Whether made consciously or unconsciously, such body language ranges from a telling motion of the hand to the suggestive bearing of the entire body to the subtle changes in composure that give the face its different attitudes.

In the Renaissance tradition pictures were meant to tell stories, usually to illustrate familiar texts from the Bible or classical mythology, and the painted, sculpted, or drawn bodies in these pictures were made to "speak" through the way they were arranged or posed. Although modern artists assimilated the lessons of their predecessors and utilized many of the same figurative conventions, they were motivated less to depict the external world or illustrate well known texts than to reach beyond known or visible reality to examine the subtle interior states of the human psyche. In their works, detailed or realistic renderings of the human body gave way to more imaginative interpretations of the figure, often involving some exaggeration of form or color in order to heighten the emotional impact of the subject.

A drawing by George Minne and a woodcut by Paul Gauguin exemplify the ways in which modern artists attempted to evoke inner feeling through outer form. In Minne's study for the sculpture Kneeling Youth, a young boy tilts his head in reverie and wraps his arms tightly around one another as he hugs a reliquary close to his chest. His self-enclosing gesture suggests an emotional timidity and need for self-protection. The figure's stylistic elongation, almost gothic in its effect, reinforces the mood of spiritual withdrawal conveyed by the posture. In Gauguin's Watched by the Spirit of the Dead (Manao Tupapau), from a series of woodcuts the artist based on his experiences in Tahiti, a female figure is viewed from behind in a fetal position that symbolizes the life cycle implicit in the title. Suggesting retreat and mournfulness in the face of death, her pose emanates from a long tradition of female figures that personify grief through their bent or downward moving postures and arms shielding the face. In both works, the figure's nakedness helps to communicate the primal nature of the emotion represented. Like many other works in this installation, they manifest an angst that stems from the introspective approach to art so prevalent in this period.



George Minne. Study for the sculpture Kneeling Youth. 1896. Pencil on paper, 131/6 x 71/2" (34 x 19.1 cm). The Museum of Modern Art, New York. Gift in honor of Myron Orlofsky



Paul Gauguin. Watched by the Spirit of the Dead (Manao Tupapau) from the series Noa Noa. 1893–94, published 1921. Woodcut, comp.: 81/16 x 14" (20.5 x 35.6 cm). Publisher: Pola Gauguin, Copenhagen. Edition: 100. The Museum of Modern Art, New York. Lillie P. Bliss Collection

ENSOR/POSADA

James Ensor and José Guadalupe Posada were contemporary late nine-teenth-century artists who worked in different countries, used different printmaking methods, and never knew each other, yet they created work that has a striking affinity. Both produced similarly apocalyptic, grotesque, and satirical interpretations of the worlds they inhabited. In their works we see remarkably similar images of skeletons, demons, and masked figures.

One of the themes essential to the visions of both artists was the inevitability of death. In *Death Chasing the Flock of Mortals*, Ensor combines the dread of mortality and his fascination with public mayhem. Skeletal demons with scythes descend from the sky, assailing an endless parade of people trapped on a narrow city street and setting populated buildings ablaze. The message is clear: bourgeoisie, workers, soldiers, clergy, women, and children alike cannot escape the undiscriminating specter of death. Notably similar is Posada's illustration *This is about Don Quixote the First, the*



James Ensor. Death Chasing the Flock of Mortals. 1896. Etching and drypoint, plate: $9\%_6 \times 7^{13}\%_6$ " (23.9 x 18.2 cm). The Museum of Modern Art, New York. Purchase Fund

Unequaled Giant Calavera. This broadsheet, or small tabloidlike poster, issued for the Day of the Dead, turns Cervantes's character of Don Quixote into a calavera, a personified skeleton. Posada gives even this satirical literary hero and his good deeds a macabre and yet humorous cast. The accompanying text states that the power of Don Quixote's lance can be wielded at anyone, regardless of profession or social class.



José Guadalupe Posada. This is about Don Quixote the First, the Unequaled Giant Calavera (detail). c. 1895. Engraving, relief printed, and letterpress, comp.: 221/16 x 137/16* (56 x 34.1 cm). Publisher: Antonio Vanegas Arroyo, Mexico City. The Museum of Modern Art, New York. Inter-American Fund

al que se le ponga enfrente.

de que les dé malos ratos.

Ensor, born in 1860 in Ostend, a resort city on the coast of Belgium, was influenced by the rich history of Dutch and Flemish painting, and as a printmaker created drypoints and etchings. Ensor's crowded compositions and disquieting subject matter were inspired by Ostend's local parades, religious processions, and Mardi Gras celebrations. In particular, the carnival masks sold at his family's souvenir shop directly fed his imagery. Posada, born in 1852 in Aguascalientes, a town north of Mexico City, settled in the capital and worked at the workshop of Antonio Vanegas Arroyo, a renowned publisher of broadsheets. These mass-produced sheets containing text printed in letterpress and images printed in relief engraving and etching sold inexpensively on the street. Their strong graphic qualities, simplified compositions, and sensational stories appealed to all populations of Mexico. In particular, Posada's images of popular culture *calaveras* captivated mass audiences.

UNIQUE FORMS OF CONTINUITY IN SPACE



Auguste Rodin. The Three Shades. 1881–86. Bronze, 38% x 36% x 19½" (97.3 x 92.2 x 49.5 cm). The Museum of Modern Art, New York. Mary Sister Bequest

The period 1880–1920 saw a change from figurative sculptures that are mainly perceived as figures to those that are mainly perceived as sculptures. By showing sculptures together in this exhibition, without works of any other medium, we encourage viewers to compare the extent to which these works read either as figures or sculptures.

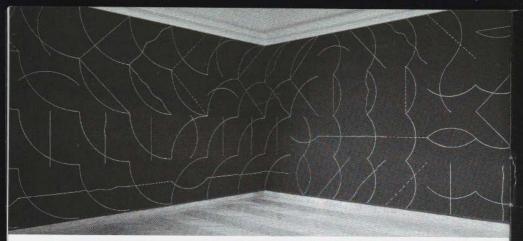
For example, Rodin's *The Three Shades* seems at first a highly dramatized composition of three naturalistic figures—until we realize that it is the same figure that has been repeated three times. The multiplication of one form in three bodies makes the work less naturalistic and more sculptural, therefore more modern. By means of the repetition, Rodin generates visual rhythms from the solid forms and the negative spaces within the sculpture. Moreover, being just over three-feet tall makes the work seem much less naturalistic than the few life-size sculptures seen in this gallery.

Just as the Rodin is actually composed of separate images, all these sculptures may be thought to be composed of several views, each comprising a separate image. With some works, an image seen from one view will hardly seem to be part of the same work as an image seen from another view. In such cases, we will especially be aware that the sculpture (unlike the figure, its source) is diversified the more views we take on it.

The title of this exhibition comes not only from the way that the sculptures do require to be experienced by moving in space around them. It more specifically derives from Umberto Boccioni's sculpture illustrated here. However, we have placed Boccioni's work in the exhibition *Composing with the Figure* alongside paintings and sculptures that also seem unnaturalistic because they deform or deconstruct the figure. In the case of the Boccioni, parts of a body in movement might be imagined to be continuing in space beyond the body's physical envelope. The result is somewhat like the "swish lines" commonly used in comics. More frequently sculptors represented

movement by posing a figure as if in a moment of time between one preceding and one succeeding intelligible movement, and relied upon our reading the whole movement from the posture and gesture of the figure as shown. We suggest comparing the standing sculptures in the exhibition Unique Forms of Continuity in Space, in order to decide which ones seem posed in this way and which ones seem, rather, fixed in time and place.

Umberto Boccioni. Unique Forms of Continuity in Space. 1913. Bronze (cast 1931), 43% x 34% x 15%" (111.2 x 88.5 x 40 cm). The Museum of Modern Art, New York. Acquired through the Lillie P. Bliss Bequest



Sol LeWitt. On black walls, all two-part combinations of white arcs from corners and sides, and white straight, not straight, and broken lines. 1975. White crayon and black-pencil grid on black walls, dimensions variable: 11'7" high x 154'½" wide (353.1 cm high x 4,695.2 cm wide) in current installation. The Museum of Modern Art, New York. Fractional gift of an anonymous donor

People is focused on figurative art made mainly in the period 1880–1920. It is introduced by Sol LeWitt's abstract wall drawing of 1975, not only for the contrast that it affords, but also for these two reasons:

- 1. The period 1880—1920 saw a change from pictorial compositions designed to represent figural gestures or postures (like Matisse's *Dance*) to compositions designed from lines and planes abstracted from such gestures or postures (like Duchamp's *The Passage from Virgin to Bride*). LeWitt's work shows the ultimate, fully abstract consequence of this development, while reminding us that curves, even with no figural context, can be seen as alluding to the corporeal. "Curves are too emotional," Piet Mondrian once said.
- 2. LeWitt's drawing comprises a sequence of 190 combinations of the four types of lines described in its title. (A diagram to the right of the drawing shows each line type and its possible combinations.) His work is broadly inspired by Eadweard Muybridge's sequential action photographs; it, too, unfolds sequentially in the time of our viewing. The change from represented, narrative subject matter to subject matter manifested in a more abstracted form effectively asks the viewer to create his or her own narrative by experiencing the abstract motifs one after the other in the time of the viewing. In this way, too, LeWitt's work ultimately draws on the innovations of the 1880–1920 period.

PUBLIC PROGRAMS

For information about Brown Bag Lunch Lectures, Conversations with Contemporary Artists, Adult Courses, and other special exhibition programs being held in conjunction with the exhibition Modern Starts please refer to the Museum Web site at www.moma.org, or you may visit The Edward John Noble Education Center. For further information about Public Programs, please call the Department of Education at 212 708-9781.

PUBLICATIONS

Modern Starts: People, Places, Things. Edited by John Elderfield, Peter Reed, Mary Chan, Maria del Carmen González. 360 pages. 9½ x 12". 456 illustrations, including 235 in color. \$55.00 cloth; \$29.95 paper.

Body Language. By M. Darsie Alexander, Mary Chan, Starr Figura, Sarah Ganz, Maria del Carmen González; introduction by John Elderfield. 144 pages. 7 x 10". 115 illustrations, including 51 in color and 64 in duotone. \$24.95 paper; \$19.95 in The MoMA Book Store.

French Landscapes: The Modern Vision 1880–1920. By Magdalena Dabrowski. 144 pages. 9½ x 11½". 136 illustrations, including 45 in color and 28 in duotone. \$24.95 paper; \$19.95 in The MoMA Book Store.

Viewers with the Modern Starts catalogue at hand should know that the contents of the exhibitions that comprise PEOPLE vary somewhat from the contents of the similarly named chapters in the PEOPLE section of the catalogue; two of the chapters in the catalogue do not have corresponding installations, and their contents have been distributed among other installations. One of the installations is unrepresented as such in the catalogue, being drawn from the contents of several chapters in the catalogue. These alterations have been made because what works best in the layout of a catalogue and of an exhibition are not necessarily the same, and because we wanted to emphasize the interrelatability of the themes presented in both.

This brochure was written by Darsie Alexander (Posed to Unposed), Starr Figura (The Language of the Body), Judith B. Hecker (Ensor/Posada), and John Elderfield (remaining sections). Modern Starts was conceived and organized by John Elderfield and Peter Reed with Mary Chan and Maria del Carmen González. Elizabeth Levine replaced Mary Chan in the final few months of the project. Administrative support was provided by Sharon Dec and George Bareford.

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